

EDITORIAL

Special Issue: Theoretical Concerns in Australian Housing and Urban Research

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This special issue of *Housing, Theory and Society* brings together four papers written for a symposium that took place at the University of Tasmania to discuss the role of theory in contemporary housing and urban research. As joint convenors of the symposium we were conscious of the fact that though there is an emerging community of scholars in housing and urban studies in Australia, the opportunities for interaction are limited because of the large geographical distances between the major conurbations. We were also aware that while a large amount of empirical work has been commissioned in Australia through the auspices of the *Australian Housing Research Institute*, much of this research is policy focused and the opportunities for funding explicitly theoretical scholarship is limited. Our intention in organizing the symposium was to debate the relative constraints imposed by this context. In practical terms, we recognized the need to provide an informal setting for scholars to meet to discuss their research. In respect of theory, our aim was to encourage academics to consider the classifications deployed in their research alongside some of the new interdisciplinary suppositions that have influenced such disciplines as geography and sociology.

What are the most substantive theoretical concerns of Australian housing and urban researchers and how does the scholarship differ from work undertaken elsewhere? To answer the first question, we identify at least five concerns. First, there has been a continued interest in understanding the *conflicts within urban and housing contexts* and how these are enacted. For example, the interface between planning authorities and private house-building developers (Gleeson and Low 2000), the contested spaces within urban settings and how these are enacted (Gibson 1999), and the home (Blunt and Dowling 2006). The conceptualization of “housing” and the “urban” as a field of contestation has proved productive for scholars. This said, there is a willingness to explore in more depth the way that these conflicts become manifest in different settings.

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A second concern has been with the question of how to interpret conflict in a period when government is increasingly complex. This question has generated growing interest in the geographical concept of “scale” and in particular the way that it can be deployed to fathom, more fully, the *operation of government*. There is now recognition that the modes of government are multi-scalar (see Anderson and Taylor 2005, McGuirk 2003, Morrison 2007) in that they “perform” across and through a range of settings. For the researcher interested in governmentality, there is a need to consider the interstices and spaces in which policy actors engage, such as the housing market, urban planning and development, and neighbourhoods. In a federal national system these questions have generated additional layers of complexity while being undermined by a historical disinterest in urban affairs and problems more generally (Atkinson, Dalton, Norman & Wood 2007).

The third concern we wish to identify relates to how we should consider *discourse and its effects*. The problematization of language was first aired within housing studies in the mid-1990s and it continues to attract interest. Discourse methods have been especially prominent with scholars recognizing that language use is performative and therefore as much part of the material world as other human artefacts (see Maginn 2007). Scholars who have embraced discourse methods have sought to explore the contested settings in which policy is enunciated; much of the discourse analysis is informed by the epistemologies of constructionism (see Jacobs, Kemeny & Manzi 2004).

Recently there has been an attempt by scholars to explicitly extend the boundaries of housing and the urban by acknowledging, in greater depth, the interconnections between the human and material world. This is what we identify as the fourth concern, what has been described as the “*post-social*” turn, and of increasing influence for housing scholars. There is not the space to say too much here other than that we use this term to denote how scholars have sought to consider non-human actors (technology, animals and material objects). Much of this work has been informed by the writings of actor network theorists such as Law (2004), Latour (2005) and the philosophical writings of Deleuze and Guattari (1987) (see Franklin 2006 for an example). Arguably, the most radical claim made by those propounding a post-social perspective is that the distinction between the human and non-human world has been over emphasized in traditional research formulations. Post-social theorists contend that all material objects generate affects. An obvious example is the role performed by technology such as it flows through social spaces, encounters and mediates many such relationships which are often seen as being purely social (see Amin and Thrift 2002 for a discussion). In practice, embracing the post-social requires researchers to shift their gaze and consider the material world alongside human actors in the enactment of policy. To take an instrumental example we might consider the growing role of defensive assemblages in many new housing developments so that entry systems, gates and material boundaries are central to an understanding of the flow of social contact in these new spaces.

The fifth significant concern in housing and urban studies has surfaced in the ongoing debate about how best to interpret *neo-liberal modes of governance* and a commitment to ask, in more precise terms, how politics are mediated by this ideology. In recent years, there has been a move away from a view of neo-liberalism as a singular over-arching ideology and instead a recognition that there are many

ideological variants that inform urban and other forms of policy deliberation (Peck and Tickell 2003). Here the work of Deleuze and Guattari (1987) has emerged as an important source, especially their claim that there is no singular narrative that can explain the machinations of politics, and from this perspective, researchers have become attuned to the complexity and fragmentary aspects of urban life (see O'Neill and McGuirk 2005).

The final theoretical concern we identify relates to two questions: how best to interpret the social tensions within *neighbourhood spaces* and to how to map the implications of these for the wider body politic. There is now a considerable body of research that has sought to look at the cleavages that are being made manifest as a result of the long economic boom. In particular, the social polarization within neighbourhoods and the attempt by some city dwellers to immunize themselves from what they perceive to be problematic aspects of city life (see Atkinson 2006). In Australia, as in Europe and North America, housing developers who seek to profit from this clientele have promoted “gated communities” – i.e. new housing developments with security systems that prevent access to non-residents. Another occurrence at the neighbourhood level is the labelling of some public housing tenants lifestyles as “anti-social”. Thus processes within neighbourhoods are articulated and amplified through political and media systems in ways that feedback and reinforce the disadvantages of those who are tenurially and spatially marginal in contemporary society. Australian policy makers now deploy the term “anti-social” as a response to perceived concerns about fragmentation and residualization (see Arthurson and Jacobs 2006) making the social simple (Young 1999) and undermining efforts to engage with these problems and rendering potential solutions more opaque.

Having identified some of the concerns of contemporary research in the field of study, we now return to the second question we posed: whether Australian scholarship differs from what is being researched and given conceptual primacy elsewhere. The short answer is “no” with the caveat that the plight of the indigenous population has generated work that is uniquely specific to the circumstances and context here yet still under-researched, deeply politicized and undoubtedly an uneasy space for researchers to occupy. In most other respects, Australia – because of its extremely high levels of urbanization – faces the same set of challenges including climate change, housing affordability and suburban sprawl. Also, like most of Europe and Japan its elderly are increasing proportionally to the rest of the population – a phenomenon that, will over the coming decades, probably lead to labour shortages and economic disequilibrium.

Papers

We now turn our attention to the four papers that we have chosen to demonstrate some of the theoretical range of scholarship now being undertaken in Australian housing and urban research. The first by Phillip O'Neill was the plenary paper at the symposium. In recognition of Jim Kemeny's influence for a generation of scholars in the field of housing studies we asked Phillip to provide a critical evaluation of Kemeny's work. Phillip duly obliged and in his paper he states Kemeny's most substantive concern – the failure of many scholars to be explicit about the theoretical

underpinnings informing their work and their uncritical interpretation of the policy/research nexus. He argued in “*Housing and Social Theory*” (Kemeny 1992) that it was incumbent upon academics to adopt a reflexive stance and recognize the ways in which knowledge is produced. For O’Neill, Kemeny’s scholarship encompasses a set of interlinked concerns: the privatization of housing; the relationship between housing and welfare; and the exercise of power in social relations. Linking these concerns is Kemeny’s espousal of constructionism and its commitment to probe the meanings of reality articulated by key actors through an analysis of the discourses and texts enunciated in political settings. Kemeny, in his later writings, noted the importance of understanding the way in which power is enacted through the orchestration of narratives by powerful interest groups. In this sense, Kemeny’s work is radical as it shifts focus away from a traditional reading of policy as benign invention to an exploration of how problems are established through contestation. In a generally sympathetic reading of Kemeny’s work, O’Neill restates the need for researchers to be vigilant to new theoretical developments and willing to refine their conceptual lens where appropriate. For O’Neill, the most productive lenses are those informed by post-structural theory enabling researchers to fathom the complexity of political engagement and its impact in housing and urban settings.

The second paper by Greg Marston, like O’Neill’s, advances a case for a reflexive and critical stance rather than a singular focus “on what works best” within a predefined suite of policy options. Marston, developing the ideas formulated by Flyvberg (2001), argues that a technocratic paradigm is hegemonic within social science communities and that this has resulted in an eschewal of incisive social commentary. As Marston writes “conventional social science has ruthlessly removed ethical ideas as improper objects of knowledge claims as a consequence of the fact-value typology which has meant that social scientists have overlooked the importance of lived experience in relation to policy”. For Marston, researchers need to be more willing to adopt an interpretive mode of enquiry. Marston uses the example of the *Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute* (AHURI) to demonstrate how technocratic discourses hold sway; as he writes, “The AHURI model is a model of research that is trapped within a conventional or traditional policy making frame. It does not step outside the frame to assert a different set of values, a new moral language”. In practice, this means challenging traditional assumptions and making explicit the conduct of power relations within policy domains. Marston cites Peel (2003) as a study that successfully challenges assumptive truths in respect of poverty. For Marston, we must avoid emulating the natural sciences, by engaging in a more literary style of writing and being comfortable in foregrounding our values and emotional responses. Marston’s views are controversial and while individual readers can judge for themselves the veracity of his claims, the tensions he alludes to are ones that all applied policy researchers have to grapple with.

The influence of feminist scholarship within urban and housing fields has been significant; for example work by Coleman and Watson (1985); Madigan, Munro, and Smith (1990) and Smith (1989, 1990) have sought to focus on the consumption of housing and the relationships of those within the home. In this respect, feminist scholars have widened the field of enquiry from a focus on production and policy to lived experience. The paper by Michelle Gabriel here draws upon this rich vein of

work through a discussion of how feminist scholarship has engaged with theoretical developments within the social sciences including “feminist standpoint theory” and “science and technology studies”. In Gabriel’s view, contemporary feminist theorists have, in the main, jettisoned an *a priori* conceptualization of patriarchy and instead sought to chart how gender subject positions, experiences and boundaries of domination have been enacted in different settings. Gabriel uses the insights from feminist theoretical writings to discuss homeownership, and specifically asks how younger generations of women negotiate the housing market and how their interactions in this market shape identity and the use of space. She argues that a more performative understanding of identity can help us understand some of the more contradictory subject positions that people inhabit in their everyday lives.

An interest in the housing market is also the focus of the final paper written by Kath Hulse. She claims an understanding of the operation of the housing market necessitates a classificatory ordering and for this reason the concept of tenure has been deployed frequently. She argues, within the field of housing, the primary classification is “tenure”; while its use as a descriptive term enables us to differentiate components of the market, there is a danger that an over focus on tenure-based categories weld us to a reified explanatory framework. Hulse discusses some of the most theoretically informed expositions of tenure classification, noting for instance Blandy and Goodchild’s (1999) claim that tenure is a form of discourse that draws upon codification established within the legal profession. For Hulse, tenure is a descriptive term but its usage reinforces existing orderings, such as the kind of subsidies that have tended to flow more often to already affluent households in Australia. To develop this argument, she explores the way tenure has been framed within Australian housing policy contexts and how land and tenure classifications have been shaped by conflicts arising from demands made by interest groupings. Australia has privileged owner occupation as the primary tenure, the legacy of which is a problematic private rental market and residualized public sector. For Hulse it is necessary to situate tenure within a cultural and historical context if its utility, as a classificatory concept, is to be relevant for understanding contemporary practices. Rather than adopt a rigid conceptual version of tenure, she suggests that it is helpful to distinguish between the occupancy of housing from the financial issues that accrue from tenure.

Conclusion

What conclusions can be drawn from our brief discussion of Australian housing studies and the papers that feature in the special edition? First, Marston’s paper in particular raises issues that, in our view, require more discussion; namely the reluctance of researchers – in the words of Edward Said (1994) – “to speak truth to power”. Marston’s paper makes a powerful case for all of us who wish to promote a more progressive mode of politics to turn our critical gaze firmly on powerful interest groups and the practices of government. Second, at the risk of generalization, it can be said with some confidence, and as demonstrated by O’Neill, Marston, Gabriel and Hulse’s work, that there is a willingness by scholars in the area to refine and rework some of the conceptual vocabularies as a way to enhance an interpretation of contemporary developments.

Of course continuities with earlier periods exist but unlike the 1980s and early 1990s, there is now reluctance by many scholars to embrace grand theories, such as Marxism, in an uncritical way. Researchers are now more self-aware in their deployment of theory and make choices on the basis of what they consider are the most appropriate conceptual lens. Such discernment is to be welcomed and the benefits are apparent in the kind of research now being published.

Two final comments stem from these observations. First, while there has been a broadening of the theoretical palette from which researchers have drawn, there is little doubt that many of the tensions and political problematics that Kemeny highlighted remain evident. Within this retreat from grand theory, a potential advantage, has been matched by a growing tendency for research to be more concerned with contexts within which the capacity to be political may have become more muted. Finally, there is a continuing tension between thoughtful and time-extensive work, which may be more likely to produce insights that go beyond local temporal and spatial boundaries, and the policy driven and political short-termism of much work. The difficult space of housing and urban researchers implies operating in ways that draw upon the empirical capital of projects while maintaining an eye on the bigger picture.

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